

[Mrs. Cruickshank #2]

Mass. 1938-9 Mrs. Cruickshank - Berkshire Hill Town Farm Wife Paper Two

STATE MASSACHUSETTS

NAME OF WORKER WADE VAN DORE

ADDRESS NEW MARLBOROUGH

DATE OF INTERVIEW June 5, 1939

SUBJECT LIVING LORE

NAME OF INFORMANT MRS. CRUICKSHANK

ADDRESS NEW MARLBOROUGH

13

Name: Wade Van Dore

Title: Living Lore

Assignment: New Marlborough

Topic: Mrs. Cruickshank - Berkshire Hill-Town Wife Paper Two

Mrs. Cruickshank had come to call. Her three mile walk over the hills presented no deterrant when she decided to call on her young friends. We were at luch and after some persuasion , Mrs. Cruickshank sat down to have just a “bite” and a glass of milk.

“We're getting nice milk now,” I told her.

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"Yes, I guess you told me. The mailman [brings?] it up from his father's, don't he? I know they have good jersey milk. The baby looks as if he's thriving on it, too. Well, now, I'm glad you are getting it - you need good milk. But what will you do when we get the new mailman? Do you s'pose he'll bring it up just the same?"

I don't know. We're to find out this week. The new one goes on Monday. How did Mr. Grey happen to lose the route - do you know?"

"Politics an' pull I guess. When Mr. Smith - that's Grey's father-in-law - retired they gave the route to Gray just till the new man got appointed. So Gray took the Civil Service test same as the othermen that wanted it. 'But I hear that the test didn't have much to do with the appointment. Seems that this new man is a friend of the postmaster's, and an Irisher, same as the postmaster, those Irishers do stick together. Then I heard that no doctor in town would pass him in the physical examination, so he went to Hartford and got a doctor he knew to pass him. Altogether it don't look too good. They say he never held a regular job before for any length of time. And instead of appointing him for six months like they always do a new mailman, he's got it for a year. Somebody said maybe 14 that's to see how he gets through next winter. I feel real bad about tha whole thing. Everybody likes Mr. Gray so much, and he was always so accomodatin' - if you needed medicine or anythin' from town he'd always bring it. And he always tried to get through no matter how bad the roads were. Why, last September after the hurricane, when the bridges were washed out, he rode as far as he could and then walked up to our place with some letters. There's not many would do that."

"Well, if the new man doesn't suit us I guess we'll just have to complain."

"Don't know as 'twould do much good if he and the postmaster were friends. But everybody is terrible disappointed to lose Mr. Gray, that I know. Why, with all the bad roads we had last fall and winter and this spring, Mr. Gray didn't miss more than two-three days. Lots of times the grocer didn't come for two weeks at a time, and some folks had to

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ask Mr. Gray to bring out a few groceries, or they wouldn't have had proper food 'less they walked to town for it and carried it home."

"Speaking of the grocer." I said, "I hear that his wife has left him."

"Yes, she went to Mexico and got a divorce, but that don't mean anything in Massachusetts, I guess. Then she came back and went to stay with Fred Brown in the big house up on Echo Hill. Nobody was much surprised I guess - she really wan't much 15 good to begin with - and Brown's no better. But the surprisen' thing is that she called up the store and ordered some groceries and asked her husband to deliver 'em. But I guess he swore at her and said he'd go to the bad place before he would ring bring her groceries up there. He's a real nice young feller too, that store-keeper. Everybody feels awful sorry for him."

"Have the people in Northfield always been like they are now? We've never got to know any of them very well."

"Yes, I used to say to Pa that I thought the girls were awful stuck up, when I was young, out he said I was silly. I don't know, though. We went to the Baptist church - they had one then - and it seemed 's if most of the young people went to the Congregational. I knew 'em all, so far's that went, but they never seemed real friendly. Then o'course I married Ben - he was workin' for Pa - and after that it didn't bother me so much. I had enough to do at home. My cousin lives in the village o'course, but we don't go back and forth much."

"How long have there been summer people in this part of the country?"

"Well, years ago there was lots of 'em in New Marlborough and there were those two big estates up in the north part of town. But long our road the first ones to come were Sheldons. That was about ten, years ago. First few years they stayed only 16 summers, out every time they brought up more things, and finally stayed winters too. We still call 'em summer people, or city people, but they really live here not. It's funny, but even the ones

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who have lived here for years and years still seem like 'city folks.' Guess you have to be born in the hills to really belong. After the Sheldons had been here a while they brought up their friends to look at our old house, and some other friends of theirs bought the Hill place."

"Do you like to have them here, the summer people?"

"Yes, we don't mind. They spend money, and give out a little work, and that don't hurt none of us! We've got along right well with them all, too, until the Bells came. Everybody else we've liked and they've been nice to us, too. But those Bells!"

"What are they up to now?"

"Oh, nothin', I guess. I was just noticin' when I came by that the place is beginnin' to look sort of run down. But the old lady has got a permanent wave! You know she drives around the country without a drivers' license, and every time she asks the boy or the girl to buy her one they tell her they haven't any money. Then she gets a permanent wave! I tell you, I don't understand those folks."

"I don't either," I replied, as we rose from the table. Mrs. Cruickshank insisted upon wiping the dishes. I asked how long she could stay.

"Well, not too long. I have to be back in time to get supper," she said. "But I would like to hear some music on your victrola. We used to have one, but not like yours. Ours had a round thing, 17 a long roll, with the record going around."

"A cylinder you mean?" I asked, selecting a record from the pile on the table. "Did you ever hear a Schumann-Heink record? Here's a lullaby."

"No, I never did, but I'd like to, my, hasn't she a sweet and lovely voice. It sounds real motherly and friendly like, doesn't it?"

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We sat silently till the stirring voice ceased, then I said,

“Now I'm going to play a record made by a friend of ours. You've heard “a speak of him before - Robert Frost, the farmer-poet. Several records have been made of his poems. This is his own voice reading them. You listen and tell me if you don't like them. This one is called 'mending Wall.’” I sat where I could watch her face. The poet's voice came forth, full , resonant, firm , and distinct. At the words “Good fences make good neighbors” my friend's thin, worn face lighted in a smile of recognition.

“My father used to say that!” she cried, and then listened again. When the poems were ended she spoke again. “Why, that sounds more like the kind of talking anybody does, except that it's better talk,” she said wonderingly. “It's not like the poetry we had to learn in school. I like this better. It's something I know a / little bit about.”

“I'm sure Jim over here would be a better neighbor to you if 18 he would fence his rows in, wouldn't he?” she went on. “I noticed, coming through your garden, the holes. Were his cows in here during the wet weather?”

“Yes, they were. I guess they just turned them loose and let them go where they liked. Does he always do that?”

“As long as I've known him, and that's thirty-odd years. Mrs. Sheldon says the's plum discouraged about makin' a garden this year. Every single summer Jim's cows get into it.”

“What makes him so shiftless, do you suppose? Has he always been like that?”

“Yes, it just seems born in him. Why, he's had some cans of white paint over there to paint his house for 27 years, and he's never used it. Twenty-seven years! Just never got around to the painting. He probably never will, now. He's been to the hospital with stomach ulcers. No wonder, the way they live on potatoes and tea.”

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"What do you suppose will happen to the farm when he goes?"

"Why I understand it's been divided in two parts. He only owns that house and a little parcel of land near the road here. He bought that of Pa when he got married the first time, and built the house so's his wife could live near the road. When he got married the second time a few years ago his children were so upset about it that they made him sign the property over to him. As I understand the boy is to get the farm two miles up the hill, and the girl is to get the house down here. I don't 19 know about Ella, that's the girl, but I s'pect the boy will lose his part of the property right quick. All he wants is money to spend on himself and the car, and he's been arrested once already for speeding. They come and tried to borrow money from me once to pay his bail, but I wouldn't give it to 'em. I've got no money to spend such a way."

"How do you account for the boy's being so lazy and mean?"

"Well of course his mother ied died when he was a baby, and Jim's sister come to keep house for them. She was awful mean to Ella always, but anything that Henry did was all right. She spoiled him, and Ella used to come and tell me all her troubles. I felt right sorry for her, out there wan't much I could do. The older Henry got the worse he was. After the aunt died and Ella kept house he used to treat her awful, kicking her and hitting her. If his father said anything , Henry would threaten to shoot him. I sometimes thought he'd do it, too. Then of course Ella got married and left, and then Jim married this half-witted woman. She bothers everybody to death, but I guess she taken care of Jim all right, and keeps the house cleaner than it's ever been. But she's always coming round and wanting something - money or food or old clothes - just like a little child asking for things that you don't want."

"I suppose that's all she is, really,"

"Yes, I feel sorry for her, poor thing, and I guess Henry makes it hard for her, over there, though I suppose Jim is good enough to her. But just the same it is a nuisance to have her

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20 coming around all the time. May Harkness told me she's been up there every day for two weeks, coming right before lunch. Then May has to ask her to have some lunch. She's getting mad about it. And the old lady down at Bells used to be nice to her, but she got to be such a nuisance that they told her to stay away. Why she would walk in and pick up the old lady's sewing and say, 'You don't want this, do you? Can't I have it?'

"Her life must be pretty bleak over there at Jim's, but I must say the place is cleaner than it used to be."

"Yes and I guess there isn't so much stealing either. At least on Jim's part - I don't know about Harold. But May Harkness told me she hadn't missed a thing from the mailbox since the woman has been there. Did I ever tell you about Ben's [?] beans ?"

"No-o, I can't say you did."

"Well, we had a big feed bag full of dry navy beans and Ben left it ettin' settin' on the porch - he was goin' to pick 'em over. Jim come along, I guess, and saw the bag there with no one around, and carried it home. Well, we noticed right off that the bad was gone, but we could see where it went because there had been a hole in one corner, and as Jim went along down the road beans were droppin' out behind him all the way. Made a regular trail. Ben followed 'em part way down the road and he could see where they was leadin' to, so he come back and said to me, 'Here's our chance in get Jim,'" and he called up the sheriff and got him to come out. Well, they followed the beans right down to Jim's 21 door and across the kitchen floor (you might know it wouldn't be swept) and down cellar. There was the sack of beans big as life. And they found other stuff too, that'd been stolen from folks round here for years. Nothin' come of it, though - they just gave the stuff back. Another time they took a plow from somebody, and got wind the sheriff was coming, so they took it over to the pond and dumped it in. No, the only thing he ever got takin in for was draggin' a sick cow in the road behind his truck. He got fined fifty dollars for that.

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"How did he raise the money?"

"Oh, they clapped another mortgage on the farm. His brother loans him money on it - no one else would. Every time Henry gets arrested for speeding they get another mortgage, seems like. I declare, seems like jails were meant just for boys like that. He's no earthly use to anyone that I can see. Doesn't work enough on the farm to earn his salt. Why I hear that he drives the truck up to the farm those two miles and his father walks both ways, in all kinds of weather!"

"It's true," I nodded. "I've seen them both!" Mrs. Cruickshank shakes her head.

"Well, I've always said he'd be nothing but a trouble. Course they're related to us, but sometimes I just can't believe it. Jim and Ben aren't no more alike than thistles and strawberries. Maybe 'twan't right for Ben to get the sheriff on to his own relation, 22 but neither was it right for Jim to take the beans! Jim was mighty mean about it afterward too. You know that hayfield next to Jim's used to belong to our farm?" I nodded assent.

"Well, Jim and Henry went in there and drove iron rods into the ground 'fore the hay was high, and of course when Ben went in to cut with the mowin' machine, these rods kept stickin' into it and breakin' the teeth. My, Ben had a dreadful time with those rods. Jim cut the hay in that field [him?] himself last year after Bells bought the place. An' no sooner had he started the machine when Sime's little dog run under it and got its two hind legs cut off! Well I guess there was some racket then! May Harkness said she heard it - the dog yelpin' in terrible agony, and Jim yellin' for his gun and cussing Sime for not keepin' his dog to home, and Sime bawling like a baby and Jim's wife yellin' at him to shut up. Sime's heart was broken, and he carried the dog all bleeding and howling into the house. But Jim made him bring it out and he shot it. Poor Sime - animals are all he has to love, and seems if he can't keep 'em for any length of time at all. Somethin' always happens to 'em, and sometimes it's deliberate too, like the time when Henry was younger and had a gun. Sime had a heifer, a right pretty one too, and she was just about to freshen. Well what do you

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suppose Henry did but shoot that heifer in just such fashion that she wan't hurt at all, but the calf was killed, so that she died, of blood poison, I guess.

23

Slow and-painful too, and Sime sittin' there beside her the whole time cryin' his heart out. Course Sime ain't quite bright, but still and all he's he ought to be treated better." She paused for a moment, then went on.

"He hardly gets enough to eat over there to Jim's, for one thing. He's got so he picks all kinds of berries to eat in the summer, even chokecherries. He'll stand for hours pickin' 'em and eatin' 'em. He's got so he loves 'em. Don't seem to mind if they are puckery and bitter. On the other hand he loves candy, but only the soft find like chocolate. I tried to give him some hard candy once at Christmas time but he said he couldn't eat it because he didn't have any teeth. 'Well, you can suck it, I told him. 'I ain't no baby to go suckin candy,' he said. And he wouldn't take it. He loves honey too. I think that's what gave Jim the ideal of robbin' Harkness's bee tree. Harkness's had this tree they were watchin', up in their woods. They knew the bees were fillin' it up with / honey, an' they were all set to take it. But one night when it was pitch dark - no moon or stars showin' - Jim an' Henry went an' chopped down the tree an' took the honey, every drop of it. I guess Harkness's are still mad about it."

"How did Mr. Harkness know they took it?"

"Well, that's a funny thing. Jim [an't?] can't help talkin' big 24 about the things he does. They always leak out. Henry and Ella are the same way. Henry was seen in the school bus showin' off a pair of field glasses he took out of Hill's house one winter. And for a long time they had an oil stove over there that belonged to Masons. Finally Sime heard 'em talkin' about it and fetched it back to Masons. Sime isn't quite right, maybe, but he knows enough to be honest anyway."

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The afternoon had worn away as we talked, and now my guest was alarmed to see how late it was. Her men would soon be home expecting supper. So she bade me farewell and I walked to the gate with her, and stood there a while watching her slight little figure as it hurried down the hillside road which had known her footsteps for so many years. I thought of the summer people and the natives among whom this backwoods farm wife had spent her life. Ignorance, greed, viciousness, narrow minded snobbery had been close to her all the years in this sequestered corner of Massachusetts. Through it all, Mrs. Cruickshank went her way, doing her best for her family, steadfast to habits and rules of conduct unknown to many of her neighbors.